New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Room Service"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 7, 1953

THEATER

'Room Service'

By WALTER F. KERR

Alexander Asro playing a hotel waiter with dreams of theatrical glory, is the sole survivor of the original production of "Room Service," and I'm afraid 'survivor' is the word.

A frenzied stageful of determined and likeable enough farceurs are charging through the motions of the sixteen-year-old blockbuster at the Playhouse. Shoestring theatrical producer Gordon Miller still deposits his full company and crew in his brother-in-law's hotel, without collateral. A young and hopeful playwright still arrives from Oswego with a bag of chocolate drops in his hand and innocence in his heart. Meals are cadged, stuffed owls are pawned, and creditors are locked in the bathroom as the battle to finance a little epic known as "Godspeed" goes on.

• • •

A potential backer flies across the room with two entrepeneurs literally fastened to his coattails. The bewildered author is hurled into bed, dusted with powder, and lavishly painted with measles to keep the impoverished menage from being booted into the street. Trussed bodies flop out of suddenly opened doors, a moose head rests improbably on a sofa, a magnificent floral wreath is draped over the body of a desperate young man who has presumably tucked away a bottle of iodine.

And, as a matter of fact, some of this uninhibited lunacy is still pretty funny. When Everett Sloane, Jack Lemmon, and John Randolph dive into their first square meal in a couple of days, they invent a pantomimic free-for-all which explodes into robust and irresistible hilarity.

When lantern-jawed Ralph Dunn, as a hotel manager who has been coddled into taking over the production's involved financial affairs, goes into the business of checking the scenic costs for an unlikely play, or when he shows a spot of tenderness for the playwright who has been inconsiderate enough to die in one of his beds, the fun is still good—and fairly quiet, too. Horace Cooper has a couple of antic scenes as a huffy hotel physician, and the volatile Mr. Asro flails at a rehearsal sequence from "Godspeed" with rewarding fury. There are quite a few times when the John Murray-Allen Boretz farce seems remarkable sturdy.

• • •

But much too much of the evening is spent in pushing a willing old warhorse beyond its actual energy. The balance of the company is acutely conscious of the fact that it is playing farce, and committed to the notion that farce survives on volume alone. Frederick Fox's tidy hotel room is roaring with outraged voices long before the comedy has generated any real momentum of its own, and the first act threatens to turn into a nightmare of shouting creditors, quailing victims, stabbing forefingers, mistimed handshakes, and a frantic fumbling at doorknobs.

• • •

Things brighten up later, as the comedy asserts its own insane authority, but even the best of the evening is kept from all-out exhilaration by the stubborn heaviness of playing and staging.

It isn't hard to see why "Room Service" once won for itself a nice, fat run. This time it has been whipped too hard by some over-eager and insufficiently skilled clowns.

"ROOM SERVICE"

Comedy by John Murray and Allen Boretz; staged by Mortimer Offner; settings by Frederick Fox; presented by Bernard Hart and Don Hershey in association with Mr. Murray at the Playhouse Theatre, April 6, 1953. The cast:

Sasha Swirnoff...Alexander Asro
Gordon Miller...John Randolph
Joseph Gribble.....
Bartlett Robinson
Harry Binion....Everett Sloane
Faker Englund...Stanley Prager
Christine Marlowe.....
Georgiann Johnson
Leo Davis.....Jack Lemmon
Hilda Manney...Jeanne Russell
Gregory Wagner....Ralph Dunn
Simon Jenkins..Eric Brotherson
Timothy Hogarth.....
Woodrow Parfrey
Dr. Glass.....Horace Cooper
Bank Messenger..Irving Murray
Senator Blake.....Jack Bittner

New York Post
April 7, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Glum Return of 'Room Service'

When "Room Service" was first produced in the spring of 1937, it seemed an extraordinarily fresh and funny farce, fast, frantic and brightly inventive. Revived at the Playhouse last night, it was still fast and frantic, but most of the fun and festivity have gone out of it, and, despite a few amusing moments here and there, the play by John Murray and Allen Boretz is now amazingly flat and zestless. The actors dart about furiously and manfully, but the gaiety that was once present is no longer forthcoming.

It is assuredly not for want of trying. You won't find a more determined or harder-working cast in town than the players who rush in and out of "Room Service," bent on demonstrating that the spirit of lunatic farce is not dead in the theater. But, where the antics of the performers in the original cast appeared almost inspired in their comic spontaneity, the activity in the current revival is labored and rather fatiguing. In the third act, things pick up a little, but the improvement isn't nearly enough for satisfaction.

Stage Vs. Hotel

"Room Service," if I may refresh your memory, is the farcical account of a shoestring theatrical producer trying to raise money and put on a new play, while the hotel in which he and his colleagues are living is threatening them with eviction or worse. If it has any point to make, it is that both show business and the hotel industry are fairly insane institutions, but, on the whole, the people in the theater mix a larger amount of method with their madness. Its humor is more of situation than of verbal felicity, and it is filled with comic "business."

One of its leading characters, for example, has been evicted from another hotel and he arrives at the scene of the action carrying a vast moose's head. It used to seem to me that the moose's head was one of the most hilarious props I ever saw on a stage, and George Abbott, who directed the first production, appeared to have invented a thousand comic things to do with it. In the present revival, it is apparently brought on for merely one dubious gag and then hangs gloomily on the wall, a melancholy symbol of the fate of "Room Service."

Being Topical

Just how much re-writing "Room Service" has been subjected to, in the hope of bringing it topically up to date, I can't say. I doubt if the original version had references to Hamburg Heaven and Gayelord Hauser in it, and I feel sure it didn't contain a line about Ezio Pinza. Since, however, the fun of the play is based less on lines than on the plot manipulations, this isn't nearly as important as the sad fact that the delightful comic inventions of 1937 have either been neglected or have lost their bright and youthful spirit.

In the roles played in the first production by Sam Levene, Philip Loeb, Teddy Hart, Eddie Albert, Donald McBride and, in a small part, Betty Field, you will now find, respectively, John Randolph, Everett Sloane, Stanley Prager, Jack Lemmon, Ralph Dunn and Jeanne Russell. Alexander Asro, who was in the original company, engagingly repeats his characterization of a waiter who used to be with the Moscow Art Theater. Everyone concerned works diligently and incessantly to keep things moving, but the old spell refuses to return.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 7, 1953

'Room Service' Still Big Laugh-Getter

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

In its heyday, 16 years ago, "Room Service" earned the reputation of being one of the great laugh-getters of all time. It is still a mighty funny play, and in its current reincarnation often manages to send the audience off into howls of laughter.

If it does not have the ring or smell of a fabulous hit nowadays, it is because we have changed rather than that it is the least bit less expert of its kind.

This is the kind of rowdy farce that gets its laughs from situations, and the characters behave in whatever way best suits the plot, at any given moment. This can be uproariously funny. But it was put together before the world became crammed full of analyzers.

Black and White.

In "Room Service" people do things to make money or eat or be successful. It is all clear, in black and white. You win or lose. In "The Seven Year Itch," for instance, or the new comic hits, the laughs come not from what people do, but why they do it.

The result is that "Room Service" seems glossy and transparent. You may well recall that its general theme has to do with the frantic efforts of a theatrical producer and his friends, to raise money to get a show on.

They have managed so far on overextended credit in the hotel where they live. The comedy takes them up to the opening, and finally through it. Some of the best laughs of the evening are sight laughs, the men planning to quit the hotel wearing three or four suits of clothes apiece. The first ecstatic meal, after a day and a half of hunger. The wildly passionate performing of a waiter who gets a chance to act.

Full of Suspense.

The comedy is all suspense. Will the check go through? Will the hotel manager find out it bounced? Can they fake the playwright's measles? Will the phony funeral, a wonderful invention, last out the premiere?

This is a kind of comedy that is very direct and effortless on the onlooker. The authors have not really helped the play a lot with the inserted gags, which usually disturb the tone of the play. Naturally, too, there is a good round of exposition to be heard, in order to create a situation to bounce gags off.

Disregarding these clouds, the evening is a good, loud funny one.

Breakneck Pace.

The cast keeps things moving at breakneck speed as long as it is expected to, then relapses into passages of complete puzzlement for contrast, to get new wind.

John Randolph plays the producer whose determination keeps the whole thing bouncing, and Everett Sloane is his hard-bitten manager. Ralph Dunn and Bartlett Robinson are the harassed hotel staff, and Horace Cooper is their horrified staff doctor. Stanley Prager is a frustrated idea man, and Eric Brotherson holds the purse strings with a comic grip.

Jack Lemmon is particularly amusing as the naive writer, and Alexander Asro repeats, from the original, his gem of a performance as the acting writer.

DAILY NEWS

April 7, 1953

'Room Service' Is Fast and Funny In Excellent Revival at Playhouse

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Today's editions of the Hartford, Conn., Courant are resorting to an artful dodge. The paper's critic, T. H. Parker, has been barred from the New Parsons Theatre and was unable to cover last night's opening there of "The Fourposter." Not wanting to keep its readers in the dark, the Courant is reprinting the Broadway notices written a year and a half ago by Atkinson of the Times and Chapman of the DAILY NEWS. Besides being a public service, this is a labor-saving idea: Why use a new notice when old ones are handy?

Why not, for instance, use the NEWS and Times notices from 1937 on last night's revival of "Room Service" at the Playhouse? Said Burns Mantle, Chapman's predecessor at this desk, "Another sure laugh collector . . . The canny George Abbott casting sense has also helped a lot with this newest success." Said Atkinson, Atkinson's predecessor on that other sheet, "At the present moment your correspondent is too fatigued from laughing to appraise the new one judicially. 'Room Service' seems like inspired foolishness."

Retains Its Freshness.

Well, why not? This farce by John P. Murray and Allen Boretz, still is fast, funny and well made. It has an entirely different cast, except for one man, and the producers are Bernard Hart, Don Hershby and John Murray instead of the solitary George Abbott (inflation, you know), and there is another director, Mortimer Offner. But "Room Service" itself remains the same—a genial and nutty comedy combining the hazards of theatrical production with the woes of hotel management. I'm not exactly fatigued from laughing, but I do feel cheered up after my evening at the Playhouse.

A farce like "Room Service" has to be played loud and fast, and it is given the proper treatment in this new production. The story, you may recall, is a preposterous one about a shoestring producer living in a hotel on the cuff with his director, his playwright, two or three stooges and a cast of 21 hungry actors. It is a case of a new and terrible crisis, or hopeless jam, turning up every two minutes. This makes a lot of jams for one evening, and most of them still are funny. And still the funniest scene in the play is the ferocity with which the producer, the playwright and the director attack a meal smuggled from Room Service after 18 hours of starvation.

The new set of actors is excellent, with John Randolph as the shoestringer, Everett Sloane as the director and Jack Lemmon making a fine New York debut as an innocent dramatist from Oswego. Alexander Asro scores again in his old waiter's job. Nobody could be more consistently angry than Ralph Dunn as the frustrated hotel manager, or more terrified than Bartlett Robinson as his assistant. Horace Cooper makes a wonderfully outraged house physician and Stanley Prager is an amiable show-business stooge. Georgiann Johnson and Jeanne Russell are tossed into this roughneck man's play for suitable decoration—and the Boretz-Murray jokes have snap and crackle, which is hard for jokes to do after 16 years.

The New York Times

April 7, 1953

'Room Service,' a 1937 Comedy by Murray and Boretz, Is Revived at Playhouse

Since the hysteria, shenanigans and downright madness of producing a show in 1953 are no different from what they apparently were back in 1937, "Room Service," which was revived at the Playhouse last night, remains a hilarious farce. Some of the lines themselves, which were meant to be funny, and undoubtedly were in a more innocent time, are not quite so amusing now. But the assortment of rapid-fire changing situations invented by playwrights John Murray and Allen Boretz are, and a cast that is willing to strain its collective vocal cords and expend its energies with unrestrained abandon, gives the old wheelhorse a vigorous resurrection.

Energy, of course, is what "Room Service" needs. For when the Messrs. Murray and Boretz were concocting it they were in a rare mood for buffoonery. With few intermissions for catching the breath, they put together a travesty on show business that keeps everyone in running shoes. Mortimer Offner, who directed the play, seems to have put a stopwatch on his charges and anyone unable to travel the course in minimum requirements probably was sent back to the gymnasium for extra training.

* * *

Although "Room Service" has had two reincarnations in films, this is its first revival on the stage and a refresher course in what it is all about probably is in order. Consider, therefore, the following situation as the basis for the gay frolic: A producer—and a shoestring one at that—along with his cast are confined in a hotel. The producer has not had any luck snaring "angels" for his enterprise, which, naturally, is a play that is going to hit the jackpot and make everyone a fortune. The producer is behind in the payment of his bills and so is the cast. At the point where a wealthy backer is on the verge, the hotel management fouls everything up. It looks like curtains and the hoosegow.

From this take-off point, "Room Service" gets on a merry-go-round and there is mounting confusion until the happy ending. But "Room Service" does not depend entirely upon its whirligig plot. There also are pantomimic scenes to make a theatre roar with pleasant laughter. The episode when the producer and his aides, deciding to skip the hotel, go through the business of attiring themselves in all the suits hanging in the closet so that they will be able to escape the hotel without their luggage; the interlude wherein the producer, the director and the playwright, having persuded a waiter to bring them food with the promise that he will have a role in the play, attack the victuals in a perfect portrayal of perpetual motion.

* * *

That the cast was chosen for stamina is obvious and propitious. The participants also have a firm belief in what they are doing. John Randolph as the fast-thinking producer—he has the agile mind of an animal caught in a trap—gives a high-voltage performance. He never stops thinking or moving for an instant. Everett Sloane, as the director, keeps step with him, as does Ralph Dunn, the investigator of the hotel's finances.

Mr. Dunn had nary a word to say as the father in "The Moon is Blue." All he did was come in every night and flatten a prospective suitor for his daughter's hand. In "Room Service" he is able to bellow often and as loud as he can and he takes every advantage of the opportunity. Bartlett Robinson's hotel manager, Jack Lemmon's playwright and Stanley Prager as the producer's aide-de camp are all fine. And Alexander Asro, back, to create the role of the waiter which he did in the original production, gives an expert portrayal of the erstwhile Russia nactor.

Frederick Fox has contributed one of those efficient appearing hotel rooms and "Room Service" is an efficient farce of the old school.

L. F.

Journal American

April 7, 1953

Frenzied Revival Falls a Little Flat

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT DIDN'T seem to me that the revival of "Room Service" which was offered at The Playhouse last night was either as well cast or directed as the original 1937 production, and was hence not as funny.

The present version depends largely upon fortissimo delivery and frenzied action, and it may just be that some of the lines sound a bit long in the tooth after all these years. It is still good for a lot of laughs, but there are also frequent dry and desolate stretches.

Taken on its present merits one feels that it fails to sustain the series of gag situations sufficiently for an entire evening. The plight of a group of destitute play producers, hanging on by their teeth in a hotel room, is a slight and frothy premise and the ensuing complications only infrequently rise above the level of reminiscent vaudeville bits.

There is the usual, desperate effort to keep from being evicted, the frantic quest for food and the solution by promising a waiter a part in the play. The consumption of this long-overdue supper provides one of the truly hilarious moments in the show.

Agonizing Crisis

Then there is the heavensent arrival of the backer and the agonizing crisis when his check bounces. And, strung rather loosely in between, sequences involving a moose head, a bunch of green bananas, a pompous hotel doctor and a phony suicide, much of which is quite comical.

As the penniless producer John Randolph is skillful and assured, but he lacks the desperate appearance which might have made his part more engaging. Everett Sloane and Stanley Prager lend him excellent support as his two disreputable partners, and Jack Lemmon is ingenuous and beguiling as the boy author.

Ralph Dunn plays the part of the irate hotel man with incredible steam and determination, and Bartlett Robinson is suitably ineffectual as the milquetoast manager. The proceedings are also brightened by a couple of dolls, Georgiann Johnson and Jeanne Russell, and a very funny scene from Eric Brotherson, as the lawyer for the "angel."

Attractive Scene

Alexander Asro and Horace Cooper enjoy brief but rewarding moments as the waiter and the doctor respectively.

Frederick Fox has devised an attractive hotel room, perhaps a little too attractive for the calibre of the guests, and Mortimer Offner directed with limitless speed and sound, and little subtlety.

"Room Service" offers many bright moments and some excellent performances—but not enough, in my opinion, to justify its resurrection.

Daily Mirror

April 7, 1953

'Room Service' Warms Up To Robust Laughter

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There have been a number of comedies over the years about the more hectic phases of financing and producing shows. None of them, in our memory, enjoyed more success or made more money that "Room Service." Staged flawlessly and acted to the hilt, it was a smash of the 1937 season.

* * *

A REVIVAL has been proposed from time to time, but it remained for Bernard Hart, Don Hershey and John Murray to bring it off. Murray penned the script with Allen Boretz. The new edition arrived at the Playhouse last evening, and drew some of the most robust laughter of the semester.

"Room Service" is frantic farce. It must be acted with unceasing drive, with terrific speed, to click. The customers must never be permitted to analyze it too closely. For it doesn't stand up under careful scrutiny. To enjoy it, you must take it for what it is and never question its contrivances or its logic.

Frankly, in these demanding days, "Room Service" doesn't stack up as much of a play. Its situations are familiar and its dialogue obvious. But it has tremendous vitality, and there is something ingratiating about its slapstick humor and wacky characters. It took an act to warm up the first-nighters last evening, but then kept them howling constantly through the next two.

* * *

ONLY ONE member of the original cast was on hand last night, Alexander Asro, still portraying the stage-struck hotel waiter with hilarious results. John Randolph is the current promoter-producer; Everett Sloane, the screwball director; Jack Lemmon, the naive playwright from Oswego, and Stanley Prager, the unscrupulous jack-of-all-trades.

They teamed to carry off triumphantly the wonderfully funny scene in which they consume a breakfast intended for another hotel guest. Ralph Dunn and Bartlett Robinson joined them most effectively in the last-act fake-suicide episode. It was uproarious. Georgiann Johnson and Jeanne Russell are orb-tonics in the two femme assignments. Eric Brotherson and Horace Cooper also have amusing moments.

Mortimer Offner has staged the farce at a breakneck pace, while Frederick Fox has designed a serviceable set.

* * *

"ROOM SERVICE" makes no pretenses to literary quality. It has no message other than there's no business like show business. It won't teach you a thing and it won't make you think. But it might make you laugh and forget your troubles for a while. If you're not too discriminating, that is. And don't go to the Playhouse expecting too much.

It's an entertainment unabashedly devised for the escapist trade. It's also something of a museum piece. A landmark in modern comedy. It had a majority of the initial ticket-holders splitting their sides much of the evening. Some of the hearty chuckles were, no doubt, nostalgic, for they came from veteran theatregoers who caught the premiere with us years ago.

"Horses in Midstream"

DAILY NEWS

April 3, 1953

'Horses in Midstream' Placid Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Horses in Midstream," last night's new play at the Royale Theatre, is a well-mannered sex comedy performed by a well-mannered cast under the sponsorship of two gentlemen producers, Gilbert Miller and Donald Oenslager. It has been suavely directed by Cedric Hardwicke, who also plays a leading role in his deceptively natural manner, and it has a balmy foreign atmosphere. It also is quite unexciting.

Andrew Rosenthal, the author, pictures a life of sin on the island of Elba which has endured for 30 years and has been a placid idyll for the sinners, Hardwicke and Lili Darvas. Into this illicit menage he brings Diana Lynn, Hardwicke's pert and dimpled granddaughter, and an attractive British beachcomber, Scott Forbes, who yearn for a lawless liaison of their own.

Sinners Beware.

I suppose it is Rosenthal's point that mistresses and lovers must choose their partners even more carefully than husbands and wives choose. In the case of last night's elder couple, who are about 70, the choices have been perfect. In the case of the younger pair there is great doubt in the author's mind, so at the end of two brief and placid acts he busts up the romance so gently that he seems to be begging the pardon of his characters for ever having introduced them to each other.

Since "Horses in Midstream" is neither pro nor con in itself, I find myself in a mild state of apathy in considering it. It strikes me that Rosenthal has avoided coming to grips with his subject; his characters spend most of their time talking about somebody else without revealing distinct and interesting personalities of their own. Much of the talk, too, is about other times and other places, which always is embarrassing to a playgoer who would rather hear about something which is happening right now.

Miss Darvas' One Scene.

Hardwicke is persuasively natural as an American who deserted a wife and family 30 years ago to take up with Miss Darvas, an untidy novelist. Miss Darvas has great European charm in her role, and she also has the one scene in the play which has a bit of a lift to it—a scene in which she offers to send Hardwicke back to his long-forgotten responsibilities.

Forbes, a newcomer from Britain, has quite a lot of carygrant masculine allure in the role of the beachcomber, and Miss Lynn is fresh and pretty as the girl who throws herself at him. But "throws" is too violent a word for this comedy. The one decisive and decided character of the lot is Ludmilla Toretzka playing the part of a housekeeper. One of those comedy housekeepers, full of complaints. Co-producer Oenslager has built himself a fine, sunny villa for the play.

"HORSES IN MIDSTREAM"

Comedy by Andrew Rosenthal; staged by Cedric Hardwicke; production designed and lighted by Donald Oenslager; presented by Gilbert Miller and Mr. Oenslager at the Royale Theatre, April 2, 1953. The cast:

Marie Louise.....Lili Darvas
Ganna.....Ludmilla Toretzka
Charles Pine..Cedric Hardwicke
Tom Atwood.....Scott Forbes
Trina.....Diana Lynn
A Visitor.....Carol Goodner

Daily Mirror

April 3, 1953

'Horses in Midstream' at The Royale

By ROBERT COLEMAN

With "Horses in Midstream," Andrew Rosenthal has gone back to the days of plays about American expatriates living unconventional lives abroad. Plays like Maugham's "Our Betters." And there are touches reminiscent of "The Circle." The author has shown understanding of his characters and a knack for turning the humorous phrase.

But the result, in our book, is mild Maugham. The idea seems a bit dated now, and not too important in a world facing weighty problems. Perhaps it seems so to us because the implications shift like quicksilver. The attitudes change like the colors of the chameleon. We wonder if Rosenthal wasn't as puzzled by some of his characters' actions as were we.

"HORSES IN MIDSTREAM", which opened at the Royale Theatre last night, has to do with a once successful New England businessman who has been living sans a marriage certificate for 31 years with a French writer in a villa on the island of Elba. He had met her one day in a Paris chemist shop, and shortly thereafter deserted his wife who had refused him a divorce, and their 16-year-old daughter.

Then up pops his granddaughter, whom he's never met. She is engaged to a young lawyer back home, and doesn't think she really loves him. At first the girl is confused by her grandfather's unusual life, and then she is won over to it. When the granddaughter is about to form a similar liaison, he is shocked and forbids it.

Meanwhile, he has been having some qualms about his own status, but when his vindictive daughter arrives on the scene and insults him and his mistress, he shows her the door. As the curtain falls, the girl has decided to spend a month or two in Paris to weigh her future.

It appears to us that Rosenthal manipulates his characters somewhat arbitrarily. His script is a rather brief and thin one. What depth it has doesn't extend very far below the surface.

PRODUCERS Gilbert Miller and Donald Oenslager signed Cedric Hardwicke to stage the play and also to act the grandfather. He acquitted himself creditably on both scores. Lili Darvas etched the aging mistress with considerable effect, though she displayed a tendency to throw her arms about too wildly.

Diana Lynn, Scott Forbes, Carol Goodner and Ludmilla Toretzka did well by other roles. We liked particularly Miss Lynn, who has looks and ingratiating charm.

"Horses in Midstream" has much to recommend it, but not enough. It's a case of almost, but not quite.

W. W. says: Man, woman, love, sex, sin, played passionately.

New York Post

April 3, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Three Generations on an Island

If attractive acting and an air of pleasant urbanity in the writing were enough for a play, Andrew Rosenthal's "Horses in Midstream," which opened at the Royale last night, could be highly recommended to the attention of intelligent theatergoers. Unfortunately, a curious lassitude and lack of vitality in the narrative interfere seriously with these agreeable virtues, and it is the playing that gives the new work its chief claim to one's interest, particularly the warm and lovely performance of Diana Lynn in one of the three leading roles.

"Horses in Midstream" is a quiet and slightly rueful comedy about the aftermath of rebellious love, set amid the romantic splendors of the island of Elba. With detached interest and considerable lack of passion, it contemplates the later days of a French authoress and a New England banker, who, 30 years ago, had given up their homes and their families to go off together. To their island Eden there comes the young granddaughter of the banker, who thinks she disapproves of what they have done but finds her own life changed by them.

Age and Youth

It is, after a fashion, something of the idea that Somerset Maugham used to brilliant effect in the finest of his comedies, "The Circle." But "Horses in Midstream" has little of the sardonic but compassionate insight that Mr. Maugham brought to his memorable play. Mr. Rosenthal, I take it, is saying that, while a younger generation can learn from its elders, it cannot repeat the pattern of their existence, and the girl of his play gives up her island lover to return wistfully to Paris and a new examination of her confused life.

Granting the material of the play, it is natural that its author should be quiet, ruminative and a little dispassionate in the mood of his narrative, and there is an easygoing charm about some of the writing that is graceful and attractive. For a great part of the time, though, it is also so mild and aimless that it is in grave danger of perishing from anemia. The languor of its island setting descends upon it, and it seems to be wandering aimlessly, without any great concern for dramatic interest. Indeed, it comes to life only when it contemplates youth.

Diana Lynn

To a certain extent, this is because the girl is the one character in the play who develops in the course of the narrative. But it is chiefly due to Miss Lynn's delightful playing of the role. Not only does she bring beauty, grace and lyric freshness to the part, but also depth, insight and imagination, making the puzzled young American a completely believable and sympathetic human being and adding vitality and radiance to a play in need of both qualities. I think Miss Lynn scores one of the definite personal triumphs of the season.

Lili Darvas, as the authoress who bears a certain resemblance to the celebrated Colette, and Cedric Hardwicke, as the runaway banker, are skillful and intelligent players who make their characterizations credible and attractive, but what they have to do and say is rarely of much dramatic interest. The cast is competently completed by Scott Forbes as the Englishman with whom the girl falls in love, Ludmilla Toretzka as a complaining but loyal servant, and Carol Goodner as the banker's embittered daughter. Donald Oenslager has contributed one of his attractive sets. But the play is only intermittently alive.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 3, 1953

'Horses' Plugs Axiom Sin Is What Others Do

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Horses in Midstream" is a comedy about people discovering their own best way to live. The play suggests that conventional American moral standards may not be the best guide to happiness.

The central situation is engaging as we meet a couple living contentedly in sin for over 30 years. The conventional New Englander has quit his family and business success, and now whittles and fishes. He met the famous French lady novelist in a drug store one day, and never again fell out of love with her.

The play finds them tracked down in the quiet island of Elba by his granddaughter.

Grandpa Goes Conventional.

This pretty youngster is wary of an appropriate but loveless marriage at home and, naturally, now tries to emulate the older people's happiness. Her grandfather proves as conventional as the rest of her family, where anyone but himself is concerned, and disillusions her for at least long enough to consider how she really wants to end up.

The play is interesting for two elements which are peculiarly sophisticated. Its characters engage in a crisscrossing of opinions that makes a web of conflict. Yet every one has a perfectly reasonable argument which suits him, and proves his point.

The second distinction of style is the comedy's objective manner. The characters experience shattering threats to their beliefs, yet the play never indulges in heroics or tears.

Lili Darvas as the 70-year-old writer, unrestrained and always wise, dominates the play by being both cause of and example for everything that happens in it. She is relentless about her appearance, and never loses the twinkle that won and held her lover.

Cedric Hardwicke plays her expatriated companion with exact appreciation of the character's comedy. This is a man a little proud of his lifelong deviltry, but essentially stuffy still about his reputation, and certainly adamant about propriety in others.

Decorative and Convincing.

Diana Lynn is not only decorative, but entirely convincing as the youngster trying to test some new standards for herself. She plays with warmth and charm. Carol Goodner in the minute role of her mother, scores with her typical sincerity and directness to pinpoint her character unmistakably in her first few seconds on stage.

Ludmilla Toretzka is infallible in one of those maid's roles which chalks up a laugh every time she crosses the stage.

Journal American

April 3, 1953

The First Draft Of a Good Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN "HORSES IN MIDSTREAM," which was unfurled at the Royale Theatre last night, Andrew Rosenthal has written the first draft of a good play. He has taken a truly three-dimensional idea; but he has only troubled to paint it thinly against a backdrop, cluttering the stage in the foreground with characters of cardboard.

His people seem to perform out of convenience rather than conviction, his more important scenes offer no shades of definition. Even the excellent auspices, and the efforts of a superlative cast are not enough to bring life and depth to the proceedings.

Here the playwright is concerned with the lives of an early American rogue and the French lady for whom he chose to desert his family and lead a blissful non-marital existence on the Isle of Elba for 30 years. Into this idyllic setting is projected his attractive 22-year-old grand-daughter who gets into the act immediately by falling in love with a 40-year-old British neighbor.

Timely Arrival

Grandpappy's New England conscience is thus aroused; the contemplation of giving his own approval to a life clearly comparable to his own leads to the brink of a rift with his mistress. But all is averted by the timely arrival of the girl's mother, his daughter. Her entirely high-handed behavior impels him back to his paramour's arms and provides the solution for the youngster's problem.

Certainly an acceptable play can be hewn from these conventional elements of nonconvention. But I don't think Mr. Rosenthal hacked away hard enough. He blew real breath into the person of the mistress, who remains consistent throughout, but the others explode like soap-bubbles in the clutch.

The Britisher, happily not divorced from a rich wife, failed from the outset to come alive; it was hard to believe that the young girl, as written, had been through the experiences described and was panting for this new liaison; even the aged lover was occasionally implausible—moving about and declaiming more for the benefit of the plot than the impulse of his honest emotions.

Acting Superb

And the scene in which the mother arrives to snatch her daughter back to respectability seemed utterly synthetic: there must be a less strident way to make the point.

Despite all this the performance of Cedric Hardwicke and Lili Darvas as lover and mistress were superlative, and I thought Scott Forbes and Carol Goodner made masterful efforts with two parts which I never quite understood. As the young girl Diana Lynn was captivating and capable but, I maintain, miscast. Ludmilla Toretzka had a few rewarding moments as the usual, disagreeable servant.

Gilbert Miller and Donald Oenslager provided immaculate mountings, as producers, especially the brilliant set of Mr. Oenslager's representing a small villa on Elba.

But I do think Mr. Rosenthal might have re-written his play once again. Maybe twice.